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THE ADVENT PAPERS
TOWARD
SELF-DISCIPLINE—
A RULE OF LIFE

By
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Toward Self-Discipline— A Rule of Life

GRANVILLE MERCER WILLIAMS S.S.J.E.

To a far greater extent than is commonly imagined, our lives as human beings are subject to rule. Regular hours of sleep; regular meals; regular times for physical exercise, and recreation, and work; are essentials if physical health is to be preserved. A person who is “irregular in his habits” will sooner or later come to grief. A rule of life is necessary to us for physical well-being.

Furthermore success in business, or in professional skills, or in the arts, necessarily requires that one subject one’s self to a rule—a plan of life—usually over a long period of time. A business man, for example, must necessarily be present at his office on *every* business day. He cannot appear only when he “feels like it”; if he does, he will not long continue to hold down his job. A boy or girl who would learn successfully to play the piano, must spend long hours, regularly and without fail, in tiresome five-finger exercises before he or she can know the joy of playing a Beethoven sonata. Skills in sports require long periods of rigorous rule, and

those who would be members of a University crew or football team, expect to "go into training", with carefully regulated hours of rest, and a strict diet if they expect to master the game. Regularity and self-discipline, in some form or other, govern all departments of human life if health, ability, and success are sought after.

It is only when we come to man's religious and spiritual life that we find this universal need of rule and discipline neglected and even disparaged. Indeed, it seems to be considered, in some quarters, a dangerously irreligious and "unspiritual" thing to suggest that a man's spiritual life can, or ought to be, governed by rule; or that any measure of self-discipline should be expected in the cultivation of man's religious instinct; or in the life of worship and devotion. Because faith is the gift of God; because God is Spirit, and they who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth; and because there have not been lacking, in the history of religion, examples of those who substituted the following of a set of rules; for true inward conversions, it has therefore seemed to some men that any effort to practice religion by the use of an outward rule of life, or to develop Christian virtues through systematic attempts at self-discipline, was contrary to the spirit of the Gospel. The results of this mistaken "spiritual" view can be seen in a great deal of present-day "Christianity"; where churchgoing

is no longer regarded as a duty, and where any real sense of Christian worship has, as a result, largely disappeared; where regular habits of prayer having been abandoned, the true meaning of prayer has vanished; and where the neglect of every measure of self-discipline in the Christian life has led to the self-indulgence and selfish pleasure-seeking which disfigures so much of our modern life.

It is, of course, true that the mere adoption of a "rule of life", as a basis of our religious practice will not, and cannot, of itself bring true religion to anyone. A rule can only be an outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual grace of the seeking after God, and the surrender to His Holy Will. If the keeping of a rule of life brings mere self-satisfaction and spiritual pride,—like the attitude of the Pharisee who thanked God that he was not as other men are, and went on to remind God how careful he was in the keeping of his rule,—a rule may prove to be a hindrance and a stumbling-block, rather than a spiritual help. But in spite of these obvious dangers, it is still a fact that most human beings cannot attain spiritual health without following a spiritual rule of life, any more than they can attain physical health without following a physical rule of life. The very fact that man is a compound being, made up of body and soul, requires that his inward religious life be made

manifest and built up by outward and bodily acts of worship.

It is encouraging to note that our own Church, within recent years, has undertaken to remind us of the need of some sort of a rule of life if our religion is not to evaporate into a mere sentimental benevolence. The fundamental outline of such a rule is set before us in the question and answer in the *Offices of Instruction* included in the last revision of our American Book of Common Prayer (p. 291):—

“*Question.* What is your bounden duty as a member of the Church?

“*Answer.* My bounden duty is to follow Christ, to worship God every Sunday in his Church; and to work and pray and give for the spread of his Kingdom.”

Furthermore, the National Council of the Church, as well as several individual dioceses, have lately issued suggestions for somewhat more detailed rules of life; commending them to the attention of Church people in general, and particularly to our young people. In drawing up a rule of life for our own use, it is important to remember that Our Lord Himself has given us the outline of such a rule in the Sermon on the Mount. There Our Lord presents to His hearers, and so to all His disciples, three definite points of religious observance; all of which

ought to be represented in any satisfactory rule of life. These, of course, are the three primary religious duties of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. (Matthew 6). It is surely a strange thing, in the light of Our Lord's definite teaching, that "our bounden duty" as members of His Church, according to the Prayer Book, while including the duties of prayer and almsgiving, omits any reference to fasting or self-discipline. This seems to us a serious omission indeed. Self-discipline and self-denial have always formed part of the historic Christian religion. The very fact that the season of Lent is annually observed by the Church bears witness to this. Days of fasting were a regular part of the discipline of the most Protestant of our forefathers. It is perhaps a 'sign of the times',—and a mark of the softness and self-indulgence of our modern days,—that "fasting" is not included in our Prayer Book as a "bounden duty" of "a member of the Church." However this may be, it is surely true that some definite "fasting", some definite saying "no" to our natural appetites and desires (even when these are perfectly lawful), is a necessary part of our Christian training. The well-known words of William James, as to the value of voluntary self-denial in the building of character, come immediately to mind. James is writing, of course, not as a Christian believer, but purely from the point of view of a psychologist. Dean Inge's comment on James' words is illuminating:

"William James advises everyone to do something, no matter what, every day for no other reason than he would rather not do it. Such a practice of self-mastery in trivial things must not be despised. Until we have tried to do it, we do not realize the humiliating fact that we cannot trust our wills to control our actions. The acquisition of this self-control by steady discipline will greatly increase our happiness and self-respect, and will be of value to us in resisting moral temptations."

"The need for such discipline is doubtless less for those who work hard and are debarred from many luxuries. Edward Thring, the famous headmaster of Uppingham, was accustomed to say: 'I cannot see the use of fasting. To a man who tries to do his duty, life is a perpetual fast!' But if 'fasting' means voluntary self-denial of any kind, the experience of the saints is against him. I believe that some form of voluntary discipline is necessary for everybody."*

A satisfactory rule of life, then, should contain provisions regarding our prayers, our alms, and our 'fasting', or self-discipline. It is worth noticing

*W. R. Inge: *Christian Ethics & Modern Problems*, pp. 138-9.

that each part of our rule corresponds, more or less exactly, to one of our primary duties as human beings. Our duty towards God is covered by our rule of prayer. Our duty towards our neighbor is included in our rule of almsgiving. Finally our duty towards ourselves is safeguarded by our rule of fasting, which should be a means of helping us to keep "our bodies in temperance, soberness and chastity."

We should never aim, in drawing up a rule of life, to make it over-strict, or really difficult to carry out. This is a pitfall that must be avoided; otherwise we are likely to abandon our rule in despair or disgust, as soon as we fail to fulfill its too-burdensome provisions. A rule of life, while making some demands upon our efforts, should be of such a character that it can be carried out by a reasonable amount of care and attention. It should represent the *minimum* below which we never allow ourselves to fall, rather than the maximum to which we might possibly attain by putting forth great efforts. From time to time, of course, a rule of life should be revised in the light of our previous experience in trying to keep it; taking into consideration the changing circumstances of our outward life, and our spiritual development. Thus a person newly-confirmed might well be content with a rule requiring monthly reception of the Holy Communion; but after a while this might well be increased to

Communion every two weeks; and later, even more frequent reception of the Sacrament might be advisable. Again, we might start with a rule requiring five or ten minutes a day for mental prayer or "meditation"; later on, if time were available, increasing this to fifteen minutes, a half an hour, or even longer. Probably it would be well thus to revise our rule once a year at least. For the season of Lent, we might well temporarily increase the strictness of our rule, having in mind the warning against making a rule too burdensome; returning to our ordinary rule of life when the special penitential season is ended. The rule should always be adapted to the outward circumstances of the life of the person for whom it is intended. Thus, a priest's rule of life should include more time for formal prayer and meditation than would be possible for the ordinary layman or laywoman. A housewife, with a growing family of children, or a busy schoolteacher or office worker, should not attempt a rule of life which would be suitable for someone with much leisure. The rule of life should always be "tailored" to fit the individual for whom it is intended.

Let us now examine in somewhat greater detail various items which might be included under the three principal headings of "prayer", "almsgiving" and "fasting." It is not intended that every rule of life should include *all* the suggested applications

of the “three principal duties”; the list is given only to furnish suggestions for drawing up of a rule suitable to each particular individual.

Prayer. Every Christian is duty-bound to join at specified times in the public worship of Almighty God, especially on the Lord’s Day (Sunday). He also has a positive duty to spend sometime in private prayer each day. The sense of *duty* of public worship has,—alas!—almost completely disappeared among many present-day Christians (with the notable exception, of course, of the Roman Catholics). One reason for this appears to be that the services of the Church, among some Protestants at least, have tended to become means of exhorting, solacing, or even amusing the congregation; rather than solemn acts of worship designed to give to Almighty God the adoration, praise, and thanksgiving which is His due. As a result, people who do not “feel the need” of the religious help that is supposed to come to them through the Church services, conclude that it is right—indeed better—for them to stay away, excusing their absence from public worship on the grounds that they “get nothing out of it.” But worship is a *giving* of ourselves to God, rather than a *getting* something from Him; it is a sacred *duty*, not merely something that we do to fulfill our own need. The Prayer Book declares, as we have already noted, that the “*bounden duty*” of every member of the Church is “to worship God

every Sunday in His Church." It is, of course, true that we do secure real help from God when first we have drawn near to Him; but the honoring of God is the primary thing, our own satisfaction secondary. For Episcopalians, Christian worship is only complete when we join ourselves with the sacramental offering of our Lord in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. That means that our rule ought to read "The Lord's own service, on the Lord's day." Every true Christian should, without fail, be present in Church every Sunday.

Private prayer ought to include not only vocal prayers,—which may be comparatively brief—to be said on arising, and before going to bed at night; but also some time (perhaps only five minutes per day at the start) for mental prayer, or "meditation". The latter word is apt to suggest something strange and forbidding to those who have never tried it. Actually, mental prayer is the simplest and most natural, as well as one of the most rewarding forms of prayer. While various formal schemes or "methods of meditation" have been used, and have been found helpful by many, mental prayer, in its essentials, requires only a *quiet place* to retire to, and some sort of a *time-keeper*, so that we may give the *full time* we intend to this coming apart with God. We may kneel, or sit, or take any other posture that is helpful to us; not too comfortable, lest we fall asleep; not too uncomfortable either,

lest our thoughts be centered more on our own physical distress, than on God. We try to make ourselves quiet, to "calm down" inside; we try to remember that God is with us. We think of His love and goodness, and praise Him for them; we ask His help; we thank Him for His many blessings; we tell Him of our sorrow for our sins and failures; we resolve with His help to carry out His holy Will more perfectly in the future; perhaps applying our resolution to some very definite situation which may present itself to us that very day. All these prayers are mostly in thought, rather than in words. We may use, as a help to get started in our prayer, some words taken from the Gospels, Epistles, or Psalms, or a few words from one of the great devotional classics, such as the "*Imitation of Christ*". Usually, as we go on in our practice of mental prayer we shall find difficulties, distracting or wandering thoughts may come to us, or dryness, coldness, or seeming spiritual darkness, may assail us,— never mind! God is there. God *is* with us. *Stay with Him, in spite of every temptation to give up.* Spend the time you intended to spend with God, no matter how unsatisfactory it may appear, and if you are faithful in this, you will speedily discover its value. Almost no other religious exercise will be found as rewarding as this, if it is persevered in. It brings spiritual strength, assurance, and courage to our life and work. A brief period of such daily

meditation, ought certainly to be included in every rule of life.

We also have a duty of praying for others; the duty of intercessory prayer. How this duty will be carried out is something that must be determined by the individual. Many people find much help in compiling personal lists of intercessions, with the names of relatives, friends, the sick, the departed, the needy, the missionary enterprises of the Church, the needs of the world, noted down. They can then go through this list, in whole or in part, every day lifting up these persons or objects to God, asking His blessing on them. Others will find it more helpful, instead of actually going through the lists at the time of their prayer, to read through the lists at *some other time*, and then put themselves quietly in God's presence, lifting up their hearts to Him, and asking Him to bless all those for whom they ought to pray. To this may be added a special remembrance of those whose needs at the moment seem most pressing; asking God to bless them according to His own good pleasure. The practice of saying of Grace before, and thanksgiving after meals, the frequency with which we will receive Holy Communion, the setting aside of time for regular reading of the Bible or of other spiritual books are other items which might be included in the "prayer" section of our rule.

Almsgiving. Under the head of almsgiving, we

might include in our rule, not only almsgiving proper,—the giving of money to the Church or charitable purposes—but also other forms of fulfilling our duty towards our neighbour, such as regularity and promptness in writing letters to friends or relatives, readiness to visit the sick and needy, hospitality to others, and similar matters.

There can be no question that the average Episcopalian does not support the work of the Church as he could, or should. The law of the *tithe* was binding on the pious Jew. By it, one-tenth of his income was devoted to the support of the worship of God and of His holy temple. Any suggestion that a tenth of our income should be devoted to the support of our parish and of the general missionary work of the Church would be dismissed as preposterous even by devout Church people. It might, therefore, be worth while to remind ourselves that not a few devout Protestants of our own day (for example, the Seventh Day Adventists) still feel duty bound to observe the ancient law of the tithe. As a result, the extent and vigour of their missionary works, both foreign and domestic, is amazing. Where real sacrificial giving of this kind is practised there is never any need to close down, or restrict, existing missionary works for lack of funds; unfortunately, not an uncommon occurrence among ourselves.

In any case, we ought to recognize that regular

giving to God's Church is a "bounden duty"; and that this giving should bear *some* relationship to our incomes. Where incomes have increased in recent years, as is the case with not a few people, it is certainly not right that they should be giving to the Church, or to other charities, the same amounts of money that were proper when incomes were considerably smaller. The basic principle of the *tithe* should be followed, even when the actual giving of a tenth is impossible; that is to say, some definite percentage of our income should be given to the Church and to other charities. We should pray about it, and having decided on the amount, this should be included in our rule of life.

Almsgiving, in its larger sense, includes far more than putting a coin or a bill into the plate at the offertory. Almsgiving, as a showing forth of the virtue of Charity, should be really self-denying. Our giving must somehow include self-giving. "The gift without the giver is bare." Those who really are poor, and unable to give money or alms, can still give of their time or effort, to build up the Church, or to aid their fellow-men. So the rule of almsgiving might well include such services to the Church as guild work, singing in the choir, serving at the altar; or kindnesses to my fellows, such as assisting in hospital work, or other similar occupations.

Fasting. Self-discipline, as we have seen, is one

of the most neglected of Christian duties. There are many ways in which it may be carried out. We are not called upon to practice great or unusual acts of asceticism; but we need to train ourselves constantly, in small matters to say “no” to self. It is a useful thing, every day, as we have seen, to force ourselves to do some good thing—it may be a very little thing—that we would rather not do. In the same way, it is a useful thing, every day, to refuse to indulge ourselves in some little pleasure that we would like to have. I can, for example, limit myself in the use of such things as sweets, tobacco, alcohol or similar luxuries. Furthermore, “fasting” of this sort can profitably be combined with almsgiving. The money that I save by self-denial can be given to the Church, or to some other charity; while the little thing that I make myself do, though I feel averse to doing it, may be such a kindly act as calling on a sick friend, or writing a long-overdue letter.

Fasting also includes the traditional penitential discipline recommended to us by the Church. The Book of Common Prayer contains a definite “Table of Fasts”:—“Ash Wednesday” and “Good Friday” being specifically named as “Fast Days”; while certain other days, “The Forty Days of Lent”, “The Ember Days of the Four Seasons”, and “all Fridays in the year except Christmas Day and the Epiphany, or any Friday, which may intervene be-

tween these Feasts", are designated as "days of fasting on which the Church requires such a measure of abstinence as is more especially suited to extraordinary acts and exercises of devotion." Unfortunately, the Prayer Book gives no directions as to how the "fasts" or "measures of abstinence" are to be observed; with the result that they tend to be ignored completely by many Episcopalians. While any sincere attempt to observe these days by some act of self-denial would show a proper desire to conform to the directions of the Church, the simplest and most practical method of observing the "Table of Fasts" is to adopt, for Fridays, the Ember Days, and Ash Wednesday, the discipline long observed in the Western Church, abstaining from fleshmeat on those particular days.

During the season of Lent, it may well be useful to resolve to add to our rule some special acts of self-denial.

The ancient rule of the Church, requiring the observance of the fast before receiving Holy Communion is another illustration of the principle of self-discipline. The custom was designed to show honour to the Blessed Sacrament, by making it the first food received in the day, and so prescribed a complete fast from food and drink of all kinds from the midnight before receiving Holy Communion. As we gather at the altar to "show forth the Lord's death till He come," and draw near to receive His

precious Body and Blood; it is surely fitting that our bodies as well as our souls should be prepared for this great privilege; and that we should be willing to practice a little self-denial in gratitude to Him who, for us, was obedient unto death. Anyone who has ever made a practice of "fasting Communion" can testify to its great devotional value.

The frequency with which one should make one's confession to a priest of the Church should also be included in this part of our rule. Periodic self-examination, accompanied by real purpose of amendment, with the help of God's grace, is necessary for spiritual progress; and, in the experience of many, this is found to be most fruitful and effective when accompanied by sacramental absolution, and the advice which is received in the Sacrament of Penance.

To sum up, some sort of a rule of life is a practical necessity for those who are earnestly seeking progress in the life of the spirit. The ultimate purpose of any rule is to lead to the development within us of the virtues of faith, hope, and love, of prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude. Our rule of prayer should bring us eventually to a state where God's presence is recognized at all times, and the practice of the Presence of God becomes habitual. Our rule of almsgiving should teach us real generosity, sympathy, and the love of our neighbour. Our rule of fasting should train us in tem-

perance in all things; and should set us free, both in soul and body, from the shackles of sin that we may more freely and joyfully serve God and our fellow-men.

"What I feel about a rule myself", wrote Father Andrew of the Society of the Divine Compassion, in one of his letters, "is that one wants to be very clear that it is a *rule*, something *below which one will not let oneself drop*; it is not an *ideal*, something to which one is trying to soar. A rule is a bad thing if one is content with it. Contentment is the death of art and all achievement. There never was a contented artist or a contented saint. . . . All beauty, spiritual and artistic, is ever beckoning the disciple to come up higher. 'Be ye perfect' said our Lord, and that gives us the blessed discontentment with ourselves and the exhilaration of the quest for the Divine Beauty."*

**The Life and Letters of Father Andrews, S.D.C.* (Ed. by Kathleen E. Burne) p. 218.

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